

# A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



*American coot*

## HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW NIGHT

Bowing to some furtive cue – from fat buildup to hormones to the right wind and weather to a shortening in daylight hours – American coots flee North Dakota’s marshes in fall for warmer digs elsewhere.

The thing is, you never see them leave. One day rafts of these dark gray, duck-like birds swim some distance from your decoys and the next day they’re gone. Even if you were in the mood to bid farewell, it would be difficult as coots migrate in the dark.

“I don’t know anybody who has ever seen them migrating,” said Richard Crawford, coot expert and professor of biology at the University of North Dakota. “I would have to believe they are not traveling in Vs like geese, but likely in big, loose flocks no higher than a mile in the air.”

Then again, maybe observers are looking too high. Scientists in Russia, Crawford said, have watched coots migrate by simply riding the currents of rivers. “This type of migration would have to be supplemented by flying, but it’s still interesting,” he said.

While duck-like in appearance, coots are closer to rails. “They’re even more closely related to cranes than ducks,” Crawford said. Its bill is stout, sort of like a chicken’s, and its lobed feet are useful in swimming.

Gadwall and wigeon sort of “employ” coots in spring to deliver some of the tastiest eats a marsh has to offer. “Gadwall and wigeon will sit up on top of the water and steal the fresh vegetation that coots bring up,” Crawford said. “Coots feed a lot of wigeon and gadwall.”

And mink, typically, eat their share of coots. Raccoons, Crawford said, aren’t much of a bother, unless the marsh dries and the predator is able to walk to where birds are nesting. “A raccoon doesn’t want to swim out there ... a group of nesting coots will maul a swimming raccoon,” he said.

Some people say coots, characterized by a bobbing head while swimming, are bad for ducks as they chase the latter away from the choicest nesting cover. While there may be some truth to that, Crawford said coots make up for their pugnacious behavior by unwittingly acting as a buffer to nesting ducks. “Coots will distract predators away from ducks,” he said. “A marsh that has a good population of coots will have a good population of ducks ... it’s indicative of a quality marsh.”

---

**RON WILSON** is editor of North Dakota **OUTDOORS**.